

8. NOTES ON THE SPINY BABBLER, *ACANTHOPTILA NIPALENSIS* (HODGSON), IN THE NEPAL VALLEY

The Spiny Babbler had for many years been considered a rare bird. It was collected by Hodgson in the 1830s. He described it as solitary. In recent years it has been collected by Dr. Ripley at Rekcha in W. Nepal (*JBNHS* 49: 394), and in some numbers by Dr. Fleming, mostly at Pokhara and Tansen, central Nepal [*JBNHS* 51: 941-943; *Fieldiana*, Zoology, 41 (1)]. Both these collections were made in winter, and the birds were described as being in flocks.

My observations are confined to the Nepal Valley, and the hills surrounding it. Here, once the bird's song and habitat are known, it is found to be an extremely common bird, and it is curious that it should have been overlooked for so long. I had lived for several years in Kathmandu before I realised how very common it was, although I had seen the odd bird from the time we first arrived here in 1947. The reason, I think, lies in its habitat. This is the secondary scrub which covers large areas of the hills round the valley, where the primary jungle has been cut down. This scrub (mostly on the north and east faces of the hills, the south and west faces being mostly grass with scattered bushes) is dense, hot, and shadeless, the bushes being only about 5 ft. high. It is uncomfortable to work in during the hot weather, and birds cannot be seen in the thick cover. Until the calls and songs are known it is impossible to judge the status of any species. Ornithologists with limited time at their disposal naturally prefer the wonderful forest areas with their great variety of species. During my first years here, every spare minute was spent in these forests. The scrub largely consists of *Gaultheria*, *Symplocos*, *Myrsine*, *Osbeckia*, *Camellia*, *Phyllanthus*, etc. Trees, such as *Schima wallichii*, *Castanopsis indica*, and *Quercus lanuginosa* are common, but as they are constantly cut for firewood and grazed by goats and buffaloes they seldom attain more than bush height. Sometimes a few Chir pines (*Pinus roxburghii*) have been allowed to grow into trees. Near villages the scrub is thin with open patches, where *Pyrus* and *Berberis* grow in scattered bushes. Away from cultivation it is so thick that one can with difficulty force one's way through it. The Spiny Babbler is found in all the different types of scrub, but is commonest away from cultivation. It is abundant on the Sankhu Ridge to the east of the valley at 6500 ft., and on Tokah Hill between 5000 and 6000 ft. On the Kakani Ridge, 7000 ft., I have not seen it, so perhaps 6500 is its upper limit.

I have found the Spiny Babbler to be, as described by Hodgson, a solitary bird. From March to May they are in pairs. The males sit

on some prominent bush, never on top, but on one side, usually in full view, whence they sing from morning till night. They are particularly noisy after rain, and in the middle of the day. They sing less in the early morning, when the dawn chorus, dominated by such birds as the Orangeheaded Ground Thrush and the Blueheaded Rock Thrush, is in full swing.

The singing birds can easily be approached to within 25 ft. or so. If disturbed they slip out of sight, but at this season if the watcher waits quietly for a few minutes, the bird will reappear and start to sing again from the same spot or very near it. The males have a great variety of notes, but the tone, a peculiar harsh yet ringing whistle, is always the same. It is not at all like a typical *Turdoides* call, nor does it have the beautiful pure whistle of so many *Garrulax* species. The call most often heard starts with a few fine whistles and then continues up the scale:

“tee ter tee ter etc.”

It also has, in the breeding season only, a very distinctive and peculiar call *down* the scale:

tee tee ker chee ker chee ker chee”.

This is sometimes preceded by a running trill. There are many other combinations of whistled notes. As soon as one bird starts to call, it is answered by another and another, usually about 200 yards apart. They can be heard answering each other for long distances, and the total number of birds must be very great. Day after day I would find a given pair in the same place, often in the same bush.

The sexes are not distinguishable in the field, and where in the following notes I speak of the female it is merely on presumption from behaviour. During March and April, the singing male is usually accompanied by a female, low in the scrub. She spends a good deal of time preening herself, uttering low churring cries, but it is usually very difficult to see her, and only by the calls can she be located. I have never heard her sing, but in addition to the *churrs*, she has a loud call: *wick-er-wick-er-wick-er*. If she leaves the bush where the male is singing, he will stop and follow her, and the two will sometimes burst out in a wild crescendo of screaming calls when they do sound very like the typical Jungle Babbler of the plains. I have seen the male pick up a leaf and offer it to the female, but she did not take it. While they are moving together through the bushes, she frequently picks up dead pine needles and leaves, and then carries

them for a short distance before dropping them; the male occasionally does the same. I was never able to see them actually building. Occasionally they would fly, just skimming the bushes, sometimes for a considerable distance, but in an awkward top-heavy manner. I have seen a pair sitting close beside each other in a bush preening themselves and occasionally preening each other, uttering low churring notes and raising the feathers of the head into a crest. I have also often seen the female drooping wings and tail and begging for food like a young bird. The male would then become very excited, but I never saw him attempt to feed her, nor have I seen them actually mating.

Later, at the end of April and May I have seen only singing males. The females may have been incubating, but I never found a nest. In June, July, and August, the males continue to sing, but now from deep within a bush. They sing in short bursts, and if approached become instantly silent but remain in the same area, for if the watcher moves away the song is presently heard again from the same place. The call down the scale is not now often heard. They are silent for long periods but when one sings it still stimulates others to reply, sometimes from a considerable distance.

A singing male, shot on the 26th July, had the breeding organs slightly enlarged and tail feathers very worn and frayed. Another shot on August 4th was in beautiful fresh plumage; the testes were not at all enlarged, but nevertheless he was singing with great zest. I did not wish to disturb the breeding birds, so did not shoot any during the spring.

In September the birds are still in full song, especially during intervals in the monsoon showers. In October they are occasionally heard, and from November to February not at all.

During the winter they are impossible to locate in the thick scrub and would certainly be regarded as very rare birds. In thinner scrub, in areas where I had found them to be common in summer, they can still be seen, especially in the evenings. They now keep almost entirely to the ground, searching for food amongst low bushes, but occasionally appearing in the open, to peck at a patch of dried cow-dung, or turn over dead leaves. They may then be in small flocks, but I have never actually seen more than two birds together.

My only note from outside the valley is from my husband, who found a bird singing in a bush in typical scrub country, just under 6000 ft. in the Trisuli valley, near the village of Grang, May 26.

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